

Pub names: true courage and good Manners

Like sex, ale showed as an early need of man. Ale's providers showed an early trait of man: to cheat one's fellows. Hence the Assize of Ale at the medieval University of Oxford. For the benefit of students, early dons joined townsfolk in seeking to suppress this infamous cheating. Early legislation backed them. A 1502 enactment required that "euery barell, kilderkyn and firken of ale and bere kepe ther full mesur". The full measure of a firkin of ale was eight gallons. And it was not meant to be watered.

Some shallow minds of today see a risible connection between this ancient word for a small barrel, namely "firkin", and an activity related to that other early human need I mentioned, namely sex. Unhappily, some who nowadays own pub chains employ people with such shallow minds as their marketing agents. Hence a rash of name changes. The *Red Lion* of old becomes the *Firkin and Fuggle*, or suchlike. Does this matter?

Some people think it does matter, and this forms a nice illustration of the perennial question how far law should intrude on everyday life. It came before the House of Commons on July 10, when Mr Ben Chapman MP (Wirral, South) asked the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr Chris Smith MP) what steps he is taking to support local heritage initiatives.

Mr Smith: We welcome the heritage lottery fund's decision to make local heritage one of its four main priorities. It has committed £8 million to its local heritage initiative, which is designed to help local communities to investigate, explain and care for their landscape, landmarks, traditions and culture.

Mr Chapman: I thank and congratulate my right hon. Friend. What role does he envisage for the local pub in any local heritage initiative?

Mr Smith: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the role of the British pub as an integral part of the local heritage in many parts of the country. Not only buildings but the names of pubs often reflect local history or events. Many pubs have changed their names for various reasons over the years, but there appears to be a growing fashion of rebranding pubs with names such as "The Dog and Doughnut" or "The Goose and Granite" - names which appear to have little relevance to the history of any area. We are surely in danger of losing an important part of local history and folk memory. It is up to the owners of a business to choose its name, but I hope that breweries will bear in mind the unique historic role that many of our public houses have and think twice before destroying that link with the past.

This was the signal for a free for all.

Mr Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I am pleased to hear that the Secretary of State is so keen on pub names. Will he undertake some research and tell us how many pubs are called "The Spinner", as that might be of some benefit to the Labour party?

Mr. Smith: I suspect that the number is similar to that of pubs named "The Silly Question".

Robin Young in *The Times* (July 11) filled in the background. In the past five years 700 pubs in Greater London have had their names changed. Last year Ann Winterton MP (Congleton) put forward a Bill that would have made it illegal to change the name of a pub without first consulting local opinion and obtaining planning permission. It failed. The Campaign for Real

Ale (CAMRA) coined the phrase “firkinisation” to describe the process whereby brewery chiefs impose identikit formats on old pubs.

The craze for change affects not only *old* pubs. After the last war a new pub in London W.C.1 was named *The Escape* to commemorate the feats of prisoners of war. The pub was opened by two distinguished escapees, Oliver Philpot, who escaped from Stalag-Luft III by using the famous wooden horse copied from Troy, and Air Vice Marshal Burton, who was the first to reach England after escaping from a German camp. For no particular reason, this pub was later renamed *Mabel's*.

All right, maybe we could do without some common pub names like *The Red Lion* or *The Fox* or *The Marquess of Granby*. But in doing so we might lose a slice of our history. The eighteenth century John Manners, Marquess of Granby and heir to the Duke of Rutland, is commemorated by many pub names. This is because, having been Commander in Chief of the Army, this particular noble Marquess charitably and at great personal expense set up retired former troopers as tavern keepers. The following lines written on his death celebrate this interesting man.

What conquest now will Britain boast
Or where display her banners?
Alas in Granby she has lost
True courage and good Manners.

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